

Byzantine Coins



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Thesis Statement

Why did the value of the *nomisma* decline after its value had remained constant for hundreds of years? Through our research, we will discuss that the value of the *nomisma* declined due to economic hardship in the Byzantine economy. As a result of the economic hardship, Emperor Alexius I was forced to change the amount of gold present in the coin.

Secondary Sources

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Perspectives

The majority of the references used are secondary sources, primarily books. While we have taken the time to dissect the information, it is necessary to remember that the perspectives of the authors are apparent in the evidence section. Although we were not able to physically examine the *nomisma*, by looking at the primary source images of the *nomisma*, we are able to see physical characteristic changes that the *nomisma* underwent over the course of Byzantium history.

Awareness of Perspectives Not Taken

The collaboration of information amongst all references has been taken into consideration; however, not all authors focused primarily on Byzantium coins and their currency. There are many articles, resources, and perspectives available regarding Byzantine coins and their currency but the used resources are most reflective of our hypothesis. As well, there are many websites published about Byzantine coins, specifically the *nomisma*; however, these sites are written by individuals out of interest and do not include references for the information. It is difficult to fully analyze the coins simply from their appearance in photographs. The specific images of the chosen coins throughout this report show the physical imagery changes that occurred over the course of Byzantine history, but it is difficult to be fully aware of the exact changes in gold content.



Figure 1: All of the *nomisma* images are photos between the periods 820-912 (Grierson, Byzantine Coins, plate 42).

Argument / Discussion / Evidence

Byzantium had many coins that were circulated in its economy; however, the



Figure 2: A *nomisma* minted after 395. Image on the coin is Arcadius, who ruled from 383-408.

nomisma was the primary coin used in the Byzantine Empire for hundreds of years. The *nomisma*, the Byzantium gold coin, is a long-standing monetary unit, being referenced “in Greek

documents from the very beginning of the empire” (Grierson 8).

The *nomisma* was such a stable form of currency for the

Byzantines that it still retains the record of the monetary unit that has held its value for the

longest period of time: “[f]or over six hundred years, from the reign of Anastasius I to the reign of Constantine IX in the mid-eleventh century, the *nomisma* remained completely undepreciated, a record unique in history” (Geanokoplos 297, Hendy II:43).

Like many economies, a Byzantine coin value system had to be established for trading and commerce to occur. It was Emperor Anastasius I who established the elaborate, long-standing currency values that allowed the Byzantine economy to thrive and that determined the importance of the *nomisma*. The chart below illustrates the ratios between the coins, implemented by the emperor in 498 (58):

Table of relative Byzantine coinage values (c. Fifth to Mid-eleventh Centuries)

1 gold pound = 72 *nomismata*
 1 *nomisma* = 12 *miliaresia* (silver) = 24 *keratia* = 288
folleis (copper)
 1 *miliaresion* = 2 *keratia* = 24 *folleis*
 1 *keration* = 12 *folleis*

(Geanokoplos 299).

When these values were implemented, the *nomisma* was made primarily of gold, naturally placing it at the top of the currency exchange value. With only one pound of gold, the Byzantines were able to create and circulate seventy-two *nomisma*.

The Byzantine Empire was a strong economic force because of the *nomisma* and the established coinage values. Byzantium became a primary trade force in the world and was able to trade with many countries. The high levels of trading resulted in a stable Byzantine economy and the *nomisma* being adopted by other countries as an accepted form of currency (Geanokoplos 4). The high levels of trade continued for hundreds of years in Byzantine history, only to be lowered once other countries began to lose faith in the *nomisma*. While the *nomisma* retained its value for a long period of time, other countries lost faith in the *nomisma* due to three major factors. The three major factors causing the decline were war, economic decline and change in the base metals used to create the *nomisma*. Haussig discusses that,

As a result of never-ending wars, considerable strain had been put **upon the Empire's economy, and this led to a decline in gold reserves** and therefore in the circulation of money. As export trade did not earn the Empire sufficient gold to cover all the needs of the state, the circulation of money was inevitably restricted (100).

The never-ending wars were a large financial cost for Byzantium, a cost that was unable to be recuperated. The Empire did not have the funds to buy the gold that was needed to create adequate amounts of currency to be circulated to revive their economy. A solution **was not immediately determined and Byzantium's amount of currency**, primarily the *nomisma*, in circulation began to decrease.



Figure 3: A figure of the Gold *nomisma* of Anastasius I, Constantinople, ca. 492-507 AD.



Figure 4: A figure of the gold *nomisma* of Constantine IX, ca. 1042-55 AD.

Figure 3 and 4 show the differences in the amount of gold that was used in the creation of the *nomisma* between the years 492 and 1055. Figure 3 shows a coin that is lustrous, precise in shape, and that radiates a glowing gold tone. Figure 4 is less precise in the shape of the coin and the colour is flat and dull; it is evident from these figures that the latter lacks the same golden lustre that occurs when a higher content of gold is used to create the coin.



Figure 5: An image of Alexius I.

One solution that was reached in an attempt to revive the Byzantine economy was to lower the amount of gold put into the *nomisma*. This was the solution reached because of the difficulty obtaining the quantity of gold required. The Byzantine coinage values established by Emperor Anastasius I, which lasted from the fifth to mid-eleventh century, determined that the one-pound of gold could create seventy-two *nomisma* and the original coin had approximately 65 grains of gold (Sherrard 118). It was Emperor Alexius I, in 1092, who decided to lower the amount of gold in each *nomisma* and decreased the value to a ratio of 1:4 (Haussig 309); thereby, meaning that each coin then contained approximately 16 grains of gold. Many falsely believe that the decline of the *nomisma* resulted from the accession of Alexius. In actuality, **“the value of the gold *nomisma* had already fallen 25 percent” (Norwich 51) in the twenty years prior to the beginning of his ruling** because of the never-ending wars and the economic hardship of the cost of war. **As per the “Table of relative Byzantine coinage values”, the *nomisma* was equal to 120 *miliaresia*, but, at the time of Alexius’ accession, the *nomisma* declined to one-quarter its original value, 4 *miliaresia* (Geanokoplos 299).** Alexius, realizing the state of the Byzantine economy, made attempts to revive the economy. One of the most impacting ways that Alexius saw to change the state of the Byzantine economy was to change the metal base of the *nomisma*; it had become too costly to create only seventy-two *nomisma* from one-pound of gold. Although the mint resisted changing the amount of gold in each *nomisma*, Alexius had the mint create six different *nomisma*, each one containing a different base metal (51) and a smaller quantity of gold.

The decrease in gold content made other countries leery about using the *nomisma* as their form of currency and trust was further lost in trading with the Byzantines.

Geanakopulos describes how, prior to lowering the content of gold, “the *nomisma* (called “bezant” in the West) . . . had become the standard gold coin in a large part of the world and was used to some extent even in the Far East” (3). The other countries saw the diminishing use of gold in the currency as an experiment and ceased trading with the Byzantine market (Haussig 309). Due to the lack of trust in the Byzantine economy, in the mid-thirteenth century, new mints were founded around the world to replace the Byzantine currency. These new mints included a mint in Florence, Venice, and Genoa (Geanakopulos 299) and countries began to develop their own proper currency. Where there was no longer a need for other countries to use the *nomisma* as their form of currency, the value of the coin plummeted. The *nomisma* was no longer used in the world market.



An image of the *hyperpyron*, from *Byzantine Coins*. The *hyperpyron* images are not as clear of those of the *nomisma* shown in Figures 3 and 4. At this point in Byzantine history, the amount of gold being used in the coin was very sparse. The coin no longer has a golden lustre and the coin has lost its radiance.

To regain economic standing in the world market, the Byzantines renamed the *nomisma*. The Byzantines believed that renaming the *nomisma* would help to alleviate the negative stigma surrounding the coin. It was in the mid-14th century that the coin was

renamed the *hyperpyron*. The *hyperpyron* contained the same amount of gold as the *nomisma* created by Alexius in 1092, with a ratio of 1:4. Unfortunately the change did not aid in improving the Byzantine's standing in the world market as, by the late-14th century, the *hyperpyron* no longer had a fixed monetary value (Geanakoplos 299).



Figure 6: Gold *nomisma* of Anastasius I, Constantinople, ca. 492-507 AD



Figure 7: Gold *hyperpyron* of Alexius I, Constantinople, ca. 1081-1118

Figure 6 and Figure 7 provide a comparison between an early *nomisma*, containing a higher amount of gold, and a *hyperpyron*, containing around 25% the amount of gold found in the *nomisma*. Looking at the coins, the *nomisma* appears more precise in its shape and the images are more detailed. The *hyperpyron* has a flat and dull appearance and the image of Alexius is not as integrate as that of Anastasius.

Relation / Significance for Contemporary Society or Education

The Byzantine *nomisma* is interesting for students to research and reflect upon as a result of the questionable economic situation in our nation. This subject matter can be **easily related to economic conditions and critically analyzed in relation to Byzantium's struggling currency.** Thinking about the Byzantine economy allows students to reflect on the resiliency of the Canadian economy and its ability to survive numerous recessions. Students can investigate the evolution of a civilization and how it used the raw resources found in their environment to create a sophisticated form of currency that was used worldwide, giving students the opportunity to reflect on the processes and resources the Canadian Mint uses to create our currency.

The record the *nomisma* holds as the currency that has held its value for the longest period of time is likely to remain, due to unstable economic climates. Understanding that complex trading of currency has existed for thousands of years is a concept that students can relate to, as monetary trading is found in their environment on a daily basis. Students can reflect on the uncertainty of modern economies to fully understand the uniqueness and importance of the Byzantine *nomisma*.

Byzantine Nomisma and Canadian Quarter Comparison



Figure 8: A byzantine *nomisma* from the c. 780.



Figure 9: A Canadian quarter.

Comparing a Canadian Quarter, something that is common to school-aged children, to the Byzantine *nomisma* allows students to reflect on the differences between the two coins. The imagery of the coins has significantly changed, where the craftsmanship of the quarter is more polished and the circular shape is more precise. A similarity exists between both of the coins as they both display iconic imagery. The image on the *nomisma* would change to display the current ruler, while the Canadian quarters have also changed to reflect the current monarch throughout Canadian history.

By comparing the *nomisma* and the quarter, students are able to relate to their currency and the differences that exist among the coins. The distinctive characteristic differences are imagery, value, and physical appearance that are found between the penny, nickel, dime, quarter, loonie, and toonie that circulate in the Canadian economy. Reflecting on these changes between the coins provides the opportunity for students to expand their critical thinking towards a global and historical level, for example: the changes in the *nomisma*.



Figure 10: Canadian Mint (<http://www.mint.ca/store/mint/learn/circulation-currency-1100028?cat=Circulation+Currency&nId=1100028&nodeGroup=Learn>).

Suggestions for Education

Even though the Byzantine *nomisma* is a part of history, these coins currently circulate through society by the means of online marketplaces; the most virtually prominent shop known as E-bay. To enhance student engagement and knowledge, educators can purchase these historical coins in mint condition; therefore, providing students the opportunity to examine firsthand the similarities and differences of these coins. An example of the quality of coins that educators can purchase through online marketplaces is shown below, which is an image of the gold *nomisma* of Michael III (842-67).



Figure 11: Image from Ebay.ca, search term: Byzantine *nomisma*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the decline in the value of the *nomisma* was a direct result of economic hardship of the never-ending wars. To try to alleviate the economic strain and improve global circulation of the *nomisma*, Emperor Alexius I changed the amount of gold within the physical coin and created six new *nomisma*, each containing a different base metal and a small amount of gold. After Alexius changed the base metals, the ratio of gold present in the new *nomisma* was 1:4, whereas the original ratio was 1:16. Other countries lost faith in the Byzantium *nomisma* and, as a result, lowered further trading with the Byzantine market. Other countries chose to create their own mints and the *nomisma* was no longer needed as a global currency. Looking at the images of the *nomisma* throughout history, it is easy to see the degradation of the gold in the coin as the lustre and shape are diminished; therefore, the market value of the coin was decreased by the appearance and physicality of the newly created coins. The economic state of the Byzantine currency can be analyzed in comparison to our economy, which presents a historical topic relatable to students. Though Byzantine coins are a part of history, they are still found today in online marketplaces. The Byzantine *nomisma* and *hyperpyron* no longer have a monetary value as it was lost hundreds of years ago; however, the value has been altered to become that of historical relevance and importance.